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26 July 2016

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Haubold, J. (2016) 'Hellenism, cosmopolitanism, and the role of Babylonian elites in the Seleucid empire.', in *Cosmopolitanism and empire : universal rulers, local elites, and cultural integration in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 89-102. Oxford studies in early empires.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/cosmopolitanism-and-empire-9780190465667?lang=encc=gb>

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This is a draft of a chapter that was accepted for publication by Oxford University Press in the book 'Cosmopolitanism and empire: universal rulers, local elites, and cultural integration in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean' edited by Myles Lavan, Richard E. Payne, and John Weisweiler and published in 2016.

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Hellenism, cosmopolitanism, and the role of Babylonian elites in the Seleucid empire

Johannes Haubold

As Peter Bang has recently argued, the conquests of Alexander the Great gave rise to cosmopolitanism as a force that shaped the political and cultural landscape of the Hellenistic world.¹ Looking at a range of ideas and institutions, from the cosmopolis of the Stoic philosopher Zeno to the library at Alexandria, Bang suggests that Greek culture provided a global framework for imperial rule, and a mechanism for maintaining supra-regional elite networks:

Hellenism, a badge of nobility, produced a cosmopolitan and transregional aristocratic culture tying together elite groups across culturally and linguistically very diverse regions.’²

Bang stresses that cosmopolitanism after Alexander had a distinctly Greek inflection: non-Greeks could join in, but only up to a point.³ The obstacles that prevented them from becoming full members of the Greek cosmopolitan elite can be illustrated with reference to the *Letter of Aristeas*, a Jewish Greek pamphlet that attempts to validate the translation of the Torah into Greek by attributing it to an initiative of Ptolemy II. As Bang notes,

¹ Bang 2012.

² Bang 2012: 75.

³ Bang 2012: 75.

‘that sort of claim ... could work well enough for groups attempting to emulate aspects of Hellenic civilisation to carve out a position for themselves within the ruling order. At the same time it is quite revealing that few, if any Hellenic authors outside the Jewish communities ever bothered much about this addition to the world of letters.’⁴

Whereas capable ‘barbarians’ were free to adopt the trappings of Greek cosmopolitan discourse, their efforts had little resonance among Greek audiences. At a purely practical level, Hellenistic imperial administrations did of course co-opt the elites of their non-Greek subject populations,⁵ but the question remains whether such measures ever transcended the level of local accommodation.⁶

This chapter aims to address that question. It asks what models of integration and participation were available to local elites in states that were universal in aspiration but exclusive in practice. Since non-Greek thinkers have left us no abstract disquisitions on the subject I will focus on the stories, or as we might rather say, the mythologies, that enabled them to relate themselves to the predominantly Greek cosmopolitan culture of the time. My test case is the Babylonian priestly elites under the Seleucid empire, partly because of my own longstanding interest in one of their number (more on him in a moment), but partly also because their example seems to me to be useful for what this volume tries to achieve.

⁴ Bang 2012: 74-5.

⁵ Bang 2012: 62, 69; see also Ma 2003.

⁶ Bang argues that accommodation with non-Greek elites operated within a stable hierarchical system which further emphasised the distance between Greek ‘cosmopolitan’ and non-Greek ‘local’ culture; see Bang 2012: 70.

My argument is in three parts. I start by looking at Berossos' *Babyloniaca* as an attempt on the part of a non-Greek intellectual to carve out space for himself and his peers in the wider context of Hellenistic Greek culture. I then argue that Berossos uses this fairly unremarkable project to propose something much more interesting: according to him, the Seleucid empire relied on two interdependent elite networks, one of them Greek, the other Babylonian. Whereas the Greek 'friends' of the king helped him run his empire, the Chaldean priests of Babylon guarded kingship as an institution. In a third step I show that Berossos' vision of Greco-Babylonian co-operation amounts to more than just wishful thinking: the Seleucid kings themselves integrated Babylon and its traditions of empire into their project of maintaining kingship in Asia.

1. Cosmopolitan accommodations

Babylonians of the Seleucid period have left behind a rich legacy of cuneiform texts.⁷ In the previous chapter, Kathryn Stevens looked at some of the distinctly local – and localising – strands that run through this material: men like Anu-uballit/Kephalon acquired Greek names and, we presume, a Greek identity of sorts, but their writings in Akkadian remained firmly grounded in local Mesopotamian tradition. Not everyone wrote in Akkadian, however, and even Akkadian scholars did not do so at all times. We have only limited evidence of the literature in Aramaic and Greek which Anu-uballit and his peers presumably also produced.⁸ But there is one important exception, the *Babyloniaca* by the priest and historian Berossos.

⁷ Oelsner 1986.

⁸ We do know that Anu-uballit/Kephalon put up inscriptions in Aramaic as well as Akkadian. He may have had a third name, in Aramaic, which is now lost; cf. Monerie 2012: 342.

Berossos was a contemporary of Alexander the Great and a certain ‘King Antiochus’, probably Antiochus I (281-261BC).⁹ His name looks Babylonian,¹⁰ and his self-portrayal as a ‘priest of Bel’ points to the main temple complex of Marduk in Babylon, the Esagila. Perhaps Berossos left Babylon at some point and settled on the island of Cos, then under Ptolemaic rule (*BNJ* 680 T 5a). That would have been towards the end of his life. The *Babyloniaca* must have been written earlier. We do not know under what circumstances exactly, but Berossos will not have worked in a vacuum, so his reflections are likely to represent – at least in broad outline – the views of his peers at the major Babylonian temples.

The work itself is lost, but we have reasonably extensive fragments which give a good sense of what it was like: book 1 described the creation of the world, and of man. Book 2 traced a succession of rulers from the first king Aloros/Alulim down to the historical Nabonassaros/Nabû-naṣir in the eighth century BC. Book 3 focused on the more recent history of Babylon: the Assyrian occupation from Tiglath-Pileser III to Sarakos/Sîn-šarra-iškun; the Neo-Babylonian empire; and the Persians under Cyrus the Great and his successors. The work seems to have concluded with the conquests of Alexander (Abydenos *BNJ* 685 F 7; cf. F 1).¹¹

⁹ For a suggestion that the ‘Antiochus’ in question was Antiochus II (261-246BC) see Bach 2013. Tatian calls ‘Antiochus’ the third king after ‘Alexander’ (*BNJ* 680 T 2), which Bach interprets as a reference to the child king Alexander IV. However, it seems implausible that a work dedicated to a Seleucid monarch would have claimed a connection with the problematic child king Alexander IV. In other ways too Antiochus I is the more likely dedicatee, for we know that he took an interest in Babylon since his time as crown prince and regent of the eastern provinces (294-281BC).

¹⁰ For a suggestion that Berossos was the temple official Bēl-rē’ûšunu, see van der Spek 2000: 439.

¹¹ For details see Burstein 1978; Verbrugghe and Wickersham 1996; De Breucker 2010 and 2012; Haubold, Lanfranchi, Rollinger and Steele 2013.

We do not know why precisely Berossos composed the *Babyloniaca*. What we do know is that he wrote in Greek and made an effort to address a Greek readership. Book 1 opens with an ethnography of Babylon that would not be out of place in Greek historical and ethnographic literature of the time (*BNJ* 680 F 1b (2)).¹² Also in book 1, Berossos establishes his credentials as a Chaldean sage and conveyor of barbarian wisdom by recounting the creation of the world.¹³ In his paraphrase, the standard Babylonian creation account reads strikingly like a piece of Hellenistic Greek physics.¹⁴

Particularly instructive for Berossos' self-portrayal as a barbarian sage is his account of human creation. This is what his main source, the *Epic of Creation*, had to say about it:

lu-ub-ni-ma lullâ (lú-u₁₈-lu-a) *a-me-lu*

lu-ú en-du dul-lu ilānī-ma šu-nu lu-ú pa-áš-ḥu

‘Let me create mankind,

they shall bear the gods' burden so that the gods themselves may be at rest.’¹⁵

The speaker in this passage is the god Bel, who advertises to his fellow gods his intention to create mankind. Bel promises to free the gods from the chores of an earthly existence, a standard motif in Babylonian epic. The emphasis is on separating

¹² Dillery 2015: 134-6.

¹³ Burstein 1978: 6-7, Haubold 2013a: 148-153.

¹⁴ Haubold 2013b.

¹⁵ *E.e.* VI.7-8 (Lambert).

gods from humans, and on putting each group in its proper place. Berossos adopts a different approach:

τοῦτον τὸν θεὸν ἀφελεῖν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ κεφαλὴν, καὶ τὸ ῥυέν αἷμα τοὺς ἄλλους
θεοὺς φυρᾶσαι τῇ γῇ, καὶ διαπλάσαι τοὺς ἀνθρώπους· δι' ὃ νοερούς τε εἶναι,
καὶ φρονήσεως θείας μετέχειν.

[He reports that] this god cut off his own head, and that the other gods used the spilled blood to moisten the earth and form human beings. And that is the reason, he says, why humans are thinking beings and partake in the divine mind.¹⁶

There are uncertainties about the transmitted text of this passage,¹⁷ but there can be no doubt that for Berossos the point of human creation was to make us *like* the gods. The idea would not have been alien to Babylonian readers: in the Akkadian *Poem of the Flood*, also known as *Atra-ḫasīs*, man has understanding (Akk. *ṭēmu*) because he was formed from a god who possessed this quality. The god's flesh also endows us with a spirit (Akk. *eṭemmu*), which serves as a memento of the creation process (OB *Atra-ḫasīs* I.223-30). Berossos, then, is not making a radical break with Babylonian tradition, but he does deviate from his main source so as to echo Greek philosophy and its project of raising man to a higher state of being.

In one sense, then, Berossos' project was not unlike that of the *Letter of Aristeas*. He too aimed to insert himself and his peers into the dominant discourse of Greek cosmopolitan elites. Josephus was sufficiently impressed with the result to

¹⁶ BNJ 680 F 1b (7).

¹⁷ Haubold 2013b: 40-41.

claim, self-servingly, that anyone with an interest in Greek παιδεία was familiar with Berossos.¹⁸ In truth, Berossos' attempt at cultural grafting was only marginally more successful than that of *Aristeas*.¹⁹ Bang's basic point still holds: non-Greek intellectuals like Berossos were free to knock on the door of elite Greek culture, but they gained only very limited access to it. Berossos failed to break into the canon of Greek παιδεία, and it is unlikely that he secured for himself, or his Babylonian peers, the status of royal 'friend', φίλος.

2. Chaldeans and friends of the king

The 'friends' of the king represented the social, cultural and military backbone of the Seleucid empire.²⁰ As Bang points out in his discussion of Hellenistic cosmopolitanism, they formed a supra-local aristocracy which maintained itself with reference to specifically Greek cultural practices and ideals:

'Greek imperial civilisation was shaped by the transregional dissemination of the social rituals of the polis, such as the athletic contests of the gymnasium, and a literary culture based on poetry, rhetoric and philosophy. It was from this network of Hellenic communities that the Graeco-Macedonian monarchs

¹⁸ *BNJ* 680 T 3 (= *Jos. Ap.* 1.128).

¹⁹ De Breucker 2013: 25 concludes that 'the impact of the *Babyloniaca* appears to have been limited'. For the transmission and early reception of the *Babyloniaca* see also Schironi 2013 (Polyhistor), Dillery 2013 (Josephus) and Madreiter 2013 (Eusebius).

²⁰ Strootman 2007: 119-180; cf. Savalli-Lestrade 1998, Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993 : 133, Habicht 2006, Strootman 2011 : 70.

mostly recruited the members of their courts, their philoi or ‘friends’, to form a supra-local aristocracy.’²¹

As a rule, the ‘friends’ of the Seleucid king shared a cosmopolitan Greek outlook and background. Non-Greeks were not normally admitted to this network. It is possible that Berossos was an exception, but his own work suggests otherwise.²² For the *Babyloniaca* does not attempt to merge Babylonian culture with Greek to the point where the former can simply become part of the latter. Rather, it suggests that there were elite networks outside cosmopolitan Hellenism that mattered to the long-term success of the empire.

For illustration, let us consider a critical moment in Berossos’ account of the Neo-Babylonian empire. In book 3 of the *Babyloniaca* the old king Nabopolassar has died while his son is away on campaign. This is what happened next:

αἰσθόμενος δὲ μετ’ οὐ πολὺν χρόνον τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς τελευτὴν
Ναβοκοδρόσορος, καταστήσας τὰ κατὰ τὴν Αἴγυπτον πράγματα καὶ τὴν
λοιπὴν χώραν, καὶ τοὺς αἰχμαλώτους Ἰουδαίων τε καὶ Φοινίκων καὶ Σύρων
καὶ τῶν κατὰ τὴν Αἴγυπτον ἐθνῶν συντάξας τισὶ τῶν φίλων μετὰ τῆς
βαρυτάτης δυνάμεως καὶ τῆς λοιπῆς ὠφελείας ἀνακομίζειν εἰς τὴν
Βαβυλωνίαν, αὐτὸς ὁρμήσας ὀλιγοστὸς παρεγένετο διὰ τῆς ἐρήμου εἰς
Βαβυλῶνα.

²¹ Bang 2012: 71.

²² Kosmin 2013: 206-7 considers Berossos’ relationship with the Seleucid court and suggests that it was less close than that of ‘trusted friends’ of the king.

When Nebuchadnezzar learnt of his father's death not long thereafter, he settled his affairs in Egypt and the rest of the territory and gave control over the captives – Judeans, Phoenicians, Syrians, and the populations settled in Egypt – to some of his friends, ordering them to bring them to Mesopotamia together with the bulk of his army and the rest of the spoils. He himself set out with a few companions and reached Babylon by crossing the desert.²³

Nebuchadnezzar has just suppressed a rebellion in the western provinces of the empire when news of his father's death reaches him. As Amélie Kuhrt among others has shown,²⁴ Berossos conceives Nebuchadnezzar as a model for the Seleucids, and the present passage fully bears that out: not only was he a great conqueror of the west, as the Seleucids also aspired to be, but with his dash across the desert he proved himself worthy of his father's throne in a tradition that reaches back to the great kings of Assyria and Babylon, and forward to Alexander the Great.²⁵

Yet, Nebuchadnezzar is not the only protagonist in Berossos' account of how the Neo-Babylonian empire was rescued. Out in the west, a group referred to as his 'friends' helped to secure his conquests. Meanwhile, another group called 'the Chaldeans' ensured a smooth transition back in Babylon. Here is how the text continues:

²³ *BNJ* 680 F 8a (137).

²⁴ Kuhrt 1987: 55-56; cf. Beaulieu 2006, Haubold 2013a: 165.

²⁵ Haubold 2013a: 110, n. 125.

καταλαβὼν δὲ τὰ πράγματα διοικούμενα ὑπὸ Χαλδαίων καὶ διατηρουμένην
τὴν βασιλείαν ὑπὸ τοῦ βελτίστου αὐτῶν, κυριεύσας ὁλοκλήρου τῆς πατρικῆς
ἀρχῆς.

Finding on arrival that the affairs (of the empire) were administered by the
Chaldeans and that the kingship was maintained by the best of them, he gained
possession of his father's entire realm.²⁶

Berosos explains that even Nebuchadnezzar could not have secured his throne
without the Chaldeans who preserved it for him. So who are these people, and how do
they relate to the military elite earlier described as Nebuchadnezzar's 'friends'? As a
way into answering these questions, let us have a closer look at the language used to
describe their activity – for although the text is transmitted by Josephus, some of the
phrasing reveals Berosos' own, specifically Seleucid, agenda.

We may start by noting the term *πράγματα* as a way of referring to the
'affairs' of the Neo-Babylonian empire. Hellenistic sources suggest that the phrasing
echoes official Seleucid parlance.²⁷ There are other parallels with Seleucid imperial
discourse: *διοικεῖν* recalls the office of the *διοικέτης*,²⁸ and the idea of 'preserving the
kingship' for Nebuchadnezzar is reminiscent of a passage in Polybius where the
Seleucid general Achaïos is said to have performed a similar service for the young
prince Antiochus:

²⁶ *BNJ* 680 F 8a (138).

²⁷ Ma 1999: 126-7 and index *s.v.*

²⁸ Ma 1999: 135-6.

Ἀχαιοὺς δὲ ... τῶν ὅλων πραγμάτων φρονίμως καὶ μεγαλοψύχως προέστη. τῶν γὰρ καιρῶν παρόντων αὐτῷ, καὶ τῆς τῶν ὅχλων ὁρμῆς συνεργούσης εἰς τὸ διάδημα περιθέσθαι, τοῦτο μὲν οὐ προεῖλετο ποιῆσαι, τῆρῶν δὲ τὴν βασιλείαν Ἀντιόχῳ τῷ νεωτέρῳ τῶν υἱῶν, ἐνεργῶς ἐπιπορευόμενος ἀνεκτᾶτο τὴν ἐπὶ τάδε τοῦ Ταύρου πᾶσαν.

But Achaios ... took the command of the army and the affairs (of the empire) into his hands, and conducted both with prudence and magnanimity. For though the opportunity was favourable and he was eagerly urged by the troops to assume the diadem, he decided not to do so, and preserving the kingship for the younger son Antiochus, advanced energetically and recovered the whole of the country on this side of Taurus.²⁹

Achaios acts in a way that recalls the role of the Chaldeans in Berossos' account: clearly, Berossos read Babylonian history in a Seleucid key.³⁰ But what can this Seleucid view of the Neo-Babylonian empire teach us about Seleucid imperial elites? Berossos introduces two key players, aside from the king himself: the king's officials – his 'friends' in Seleucid parlance – are at the forefront of imperial expansion. By contrast, the Chaldeans 'preserve kingship' back in Babylon. In their own way, both groups strive to secure the πράγματα of the king, though they do so in different ways. Berossos portrays the φίλοι as close to the king, and as directly involved in his ventures. For better or worse, they play a crucial role in determining the fortunes of

²⁹ Polybius 4.48.9-10.

³⁰ For Berossos using Seleucid language and ideas to describe the Neo-Babylonian empire see also Dillery 2013, Dillery 2015: 271-85.

the empire, enabling Nebuchadnezzar's accession to power but also murdering the infant king Labashi-Marduk later in book 3:

τούτου υἱὸς Λαβοροσοάρχοδος ἐκυρίευσεν μὲν τῆς βασιλείας παῖς ὢν μῆνας θ,
ἐπιβουλευθεὶς δὲ διὰ τὸ πολλὰ ἐμφαίνειν κακοήθει ὑπὸ τῶν φίλων
ἀπετυμπανίσθη.

His son Labashi-Marduk was king for nine months, while he was still a child.
Because he displayed much wickedness, the friends plotted against him and
put him to death.³¹

Berosos explains that there were good reasons for this unwholesome intervention (the baby king was κακοήθης, 'depraved'), but the fact remains that the murder of a legitimate monarch is not only a problem in its own right, but also leads on to the demise of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty as a whole. For, as Berosos explains, the φίλος who took over from Labashi-Marduk under such murky circumstances was Nabonidus, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings.

In the *Babyloniaca*, then, the friends of the king intervene very directly in the affairs of the empire, and not always in a salutary way. By contrast, the Chaldeans represent, and protect, an inherited order that is in principle unchangeable. They do not travel with the army, and do not involve themselves in the cut and thrust of imperial expansion. And yet, their loyalty needs no prompt: Nebuchadnezzar simply 'finds' on returning that the Chaldeans have looked after the affairs of the empire. Moreover, what the Chaldeans preserve for the king is not a personal fiefdom but 'kingship' as an abstract concept. The text of the *Babyloniaca* is of course

³¹ *BNJ* 680 F 9a (148).

fragmentary, but the overall picture of two interdependent elite networks, each with its own function and characteristics, seems reasonably clear.

Elsewhere in his work, Berossos explains how this situation could arise, and derives what we might call a charter for Seleucid elite interaction from precisely the two groups who feature in his account of Nebuchadnezzar: the φίλοι of the king and the Chaldeans of Babylon. Those two groups, he tells us, used to be one and the same, but they diverged at a crucial moment in human history. The decisive passage comes in book 2 of the *Babyloniaca*, where Berossos describes the great flood that came about during the times of the Chaldean king Xisouthros. For Berossos, the flood was above all a cultural event, and the flood hero Xisouthros remarkable not so much for preserving ‘the seed of all living creatures’ (as the *Gilgamesh Epic* has it) but rather for rescuing all human writings, ‘beginnings, middles and ends’.³² The narrative unfolds in several stages: first a god appears to Xisouthros in a dream and informs him of the impending flood; as part of his preparations, Xisouthros is to bury all human writings in Sippar, city of the sun. Xisouthros carries out these orders and then embarks on a ship, together with all animals, his own family and – importantly for our purposes – his closest φίλοι:

τὸν Κρόνον αὐτῷ κατὰ τὸν ὕπνον ἐπιστάντα φάναι μὴνὸς Δαισίου πέμπτῃ
καὶ δεκάτῃ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ὑπὸ κατακλυσμοῦ διαφθάρησεσθαι. κελεῦσαι
οὖν [διὰ] γραμμάτων πάντων ἀρχὰς καὶ μέσα καὶ τελευτὰς ὀρύξαντα θεῖναι ἐν
πόλει Ἡλίου Σι[σ]πάρους καὶ ναυπηγησάμενον σκάφος ἐμβῆναι μετὰ τῶν
συγγενῶν καὶ ἀναγκαίων φίλων ... τὸν δὲ οὐ παρακούσαντα ναυπηγήσασθαι

³² For the *Gilgamesh Epic* see SB *Gilg.* XI.27. For Berossos see *BNJ* 680 F 4b (14–17) and the discussion in De Breucker, *BNJ ad loc.*; Haubold 2013a: 159–60; Dillery 2015: 253–64.

σκάφος ... τὰ δὲ συνταχθέντα πάντα συνθέσθαι, καὶ γυναῖκα καὶ τέκνα καὶ τοὺς ἀναγκαίους φίλους ἐμβιβάσαι.

Kronos appeared to him in his sleep and said that on the fifteenth of the month of Daisios mankind would be destroyed by a flood. He therefore ordered him to bury the beginnings, middle parts and ends of all writings in Sippar, the city of the Sun. And after building a ship he was to embark on it with his family and close friends. ... He did not disobey and built a boat ... and loaded it with all he had been told and brought on board his wife and children and close friends.³³

When they first appear, the φίλοι of Xisouthros are slipped in almost as an afterthought, but they become important after the flood: when the waters recede, the king and his family disappear, and a voice from heaven instructs their companions to become ‘god-fearing’, and to re-establish human civilisation by digging up the archive of pre-flood literature. What we have here is not just an etiology of the Chaldeans as a body of priestly experts but also a template for how they relate to the Seleucid king, the ruling elite of Greco-Macedonian friends of the king, and the empire as a whole: as φίλοι of Xisouthros, the Chaldeans inherit the task of maintaining the kingdom and ensuring dynastic continuity. In practice, Berossos suggests, this need not entail close contact with the rulers themselves, or indeed with their military elites (we recall the narrative of Nebuchadnezzar and his western campaign). But it does entail a shared vision for the empire which goes beyond the historically-grounded localism that Kathryn Stevens discusses elsewhere in this

³³ *BNJ* 680 F 4b (14).

volume.³⁴ In effect, Berossos offers a charter for participation in the Seleucid Empire which includes both Greek *and* Babylonian elites.

3. Maintaining the kingdom

Berossos, we have seen, envisages the Neo-Babylonian Empire as relying on two distinctive elite networks: the generals and courtiers of the king whom he calls his ‘friends’, and the Chaldeans of Babylon. Berossos himself invites us to read this arrangement in a Seleucid key. If we follow him, we can say, with only slight simplification, that according to him, the role of Antiochus’ Greek elites was to take charge of political and military matters around the empire, whereas the Chaldeans guaranteed dynastic continuity. This is a compelling vision in its own right, and one that casts an interesting light on what a leading Babylonian thinker made of the Seleucid Empire and his own role in it. But what relation, if any, does Berossos’ model of elite interaction have with real-life politics? Would the Seleucid kings and their ‘friends’ have recognised it as meaningful and relevant to them?

Prima facie that seems unlikely, given the gap in culture and outlook between the Babylonian temples and Seleucid Greeks. To the Greeks, the Babylonians were ‘barbarians’, a notion which could accommodate respect for their esoteric wisdom but otherwise left little room for cultural rapprochement. Aristotle, for one, had no qualms about declaring all barbarians natural slaves.³⁵ Babylonian authors tend to be more guarded, but at least one extant text, the *Ptolemy III Chronicle*, suggests that the distaste for the other may have been mutual: it describes an invading Ptolemaic army

³⁴ Above, pp. 000-000.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* I.2-7.

as ‘Hanaeans clad in iron who do not fear the gods’.³⁶ At one level, this is of course an attempt to create a shared enemy for Babylonians and Seleucid Greeks.³⁷ But at another it shows how invading Greeks could appear from a Babylonian perspective.

There can be no doubt, of course, that Greeks and Babylonians found ways of coexisting in Seleucid Mesopotamia. They sometimes intermarried (the family of Anu-uballit/Kephalon is an example), and they certainly interacted. Politically, however, the two communities remained clearly distinct,³⁸ and their different political status was understood to reflect different cultures. Thus, one late Babylonian chronicle refers to the (Greek) ‘citizens’ of Babylon as people ‘who anoint themselves with oil like the citizens of Seleucia’ – an allusion perhaps to the gymnasium and the nudity that, shockingly to most Babylonians, was on display there.³⁹

Berossos’ mythology of the Chaldeans suggested how these cultures could nonetheless work together in the interest of the empire. But did his Greek readers share his view of Greco-Babylonian co-operation? Even if we accept that Berossos spoke for most members of the Babylonian temple elites (and we must allow for the possibility that some of them would have disagreed), there remains the question of what Antiochus and other Greek readers would have made of his proposals. Did Berossos’ model of elite interaction have any purchase in the world of Seleucid *realpolitik* or was it simply the product of wishful thinking? In the final part of my chapter I argue that – however we assess the impact of Berossos’ work – he did articulate something important, and real, about how the Seleucid empire worked. Like

³⁶ *BCHP* 11, ll. 6-7.

³⁷ Haubold 2013a: 134-5.

³⁸ Van der Spek 2009.

³⁹ *BCHP* 14, esp. ll. 2-4, with van der Spek’s note *ad l.* 4.

Nebuchadnezzar in the *Babyloniaca*, real-life Seleucid kings from Antiochus I to Antiochus III turned to their Chaldean elites at moments of crisis. Rather than reviewing all the relevant evidence here, let me single out one example that seems to me to be particularly instructive.

Just after his defeat at the hands of the Romans, and still smarting from the disastrous treaty of Apamea, Antiochus III came to visit Babylon. When he arrived in the city, the empire was at a low ebb: Antiochus had just lost a major war and with it vast amounts of military equipment, manpower, money and territory. His reputation too had taken a knock: Antiochus had styled himself a conqueror king in the tradition of Alexander, so a defeat of this magnitude was not an easy sell. Antiochus had conducted much of his western campaign, as already his earlier re-conquest of the east, under the banner of recovering what was rightfully his:⁴⁰ to Seleucid observers, his wars were not just acts of bravado but signalled a restoration of the empire after decades of uncertainty. Now that his aims had turned out to be unattainable, the future of the empire as a whole, its very shape and purpose, came into question. How bad things had got may be seen from the fact that, just a few months later, Antiochus was dead, killed while attempting to press money from a temple in Elam. But first he visited Babylon.

The episode is recorded in loving detail in an *Astronomical Diary* of 188/7 BC.⁴¹ The *Astronomical Diaries* were a curious set of texts which recorded routine celestial observations but also included notes on the weather, the economy and brief

⁴⁰ Ma 1999: ch. 1; but see Kosmin 2014: ch. 5 for the Greek campaign as a war of expansion.

⁴¹ AD -187 (Sachs and Hunger).

accounts of important political events.⁴² The passage about Antiochus' visit to Babylon is precisely such an account, though it is exceptionally long and detailed: clearly, Antiochus' visit was of some importance – at least from a Babylonian perspective. The result of all this attention to detail is an amazingly rich text, and one which would deserve a paper all of its own. Here I want to focus on just two of the objects that are presented to Antiochus in the course of his visit: a 1,000 shekel crown made of gold, and the cloak of Nebuchadnezzar.

To take the crown first, John Ma points out that crowns constituted a standard way of honouring victorious kings in the Hellenistic world, often combining symbolic value with very real material worth.⁴³ Antiochus, of course, was far from victorious at this point in time, and he desperately needed money. Under such circumstances, it was relevant that the Babylonian crown had a significant value, as the author of the *Diary* stresses. But at least equally important was the symbolic significance of the object: the top official (*šatammu*) and governing assembly of the Esagila bestowed on Antiochus a powerful token of kingship. In so doing, they expressed not only their own continued allegiance to the king but also that of the city of Babylon and – presumably – much of the surrounding territory besides.⁴⁴

This is a stunning gesture, but there is more to come. After the 1,000 shekel crown, and a series of other gifts, the narrative culminates in the cloak of Nebuchadnezzar being brought out from the magazines of Esagila. Once again, the gesture is transparently legitimising, but this time the effect is more pointed: the cloak

⁴² Edition in Sachs and Hunger 1988-96; Del Monte 1997 prints the historical sections with Italian translation and commentary. For discussion of the historical sections see also van der Spek 1993 and Pirngruber 2013.

⁴³ Ma 1999: 204.

⁴⁴ For the *šatammu* and the assembly of the Esagila see Clancier 2012.

is not simply handed to Antiochus but recovered from the archives of Babylon, where it had been stored for safekeeping since the days of Nebuchadnezzar. This is not just a piece of clothing, however precious. Rather, it is a token of precisely the mythology of elite interaction that I have been discussing in this chapter: the king has fought a war, with the help of his (Greek) φίλοι. But now something else is needed, something that only the Chaldeans can provide.

It is not entirely clear what Antiochus does with the cloak of Nebuchadnezzar – perhaps he puts it on, or perhaps he merely marvels at it. Either way, the king accepts his place in the tradition of universal kingship which Berossos describes, and he also accepts the peculiar role of the Chaldeans at the heart of his empire: these men were not close to him personally or culturally, and he is not likely to have encountered them on a regular basis. But when the king's fortunes were at their lowest ebb, they had something to offer that not even the king's most loyal courtiers could provide: a war had been lost, but the kingdom had been maintained.

Conclusion

Scholars have often suggested that the Seleucid empire was held together – to the extent that it did hold together – by discrete acts of accommodation between a cosmopolitan Greek centre and non-Greek local elites.⁴⁵ The picture that emerges is one of integration through subordination, to use the conceptual framework proposed by the editors of this volume.⁴⁶ In this chapter, I have argued for a rather more complex alliance of the local and the global. Defining tokens of empire – objects as well as stories – were kept in the archives of Babylon whence they could be retrieved

⁴⁵ For an eloquent articulation of this view see Ma 1999, 2003.

⁴⁶ Above, pp. 000-000.

at times of crisis. The Chaldeans as guardians of the archives thus came to see themselves, and to be seen by their Greek masters, as guardians of kingship *par excellence*, alongside the ruling elites of the king's 'friends'. Berossos explained to the Seleucids how this situation had arisen and how it could work for them; and in broad outlines at least, they seem to have embraced it.

To be sure, the Seleucids did not elevate Babylonian culture to the same level as Greek, nor did they attempt to create a composite ruling class of the sort that might impress historians of the later Roman Empire.⁴⁷ But they too grappled with the challenge of holding together a disparate empire. Berossos' mythology of the king, his 'friends' and the Chaldeans suggests a fully-worked out model of elite participation which we see reflected in historical events such as Antiochus III's visit to Babylon. What Babylonians thought about their role in the Seleucid Empire clearly mattered to the Seleucids, and it should matter to us too: we need to know more about the stories that non-Greeks of the Hellenistic period told their masters – both about themselves and about the states in which they lived. And we need to know how their stories informed social and political practice in the Hellenistic empires if we are to understand better what sustained them, and what cosmopolitan legacies they left behind.

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⁴⁷ Weisweiler, this volume pp. 000-000.

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